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Press-Gazette photo by Joan Gutheridge

The final days: St. Francis de Paul Church members Norbert Johnson, left, and Don Spude, right,

visit with the Rev. Richard Mauthe outside the church. The church will close after Mass Sunday.

Duvall church closing brings a sense of loss

By Mary Colurso

Press-Gazette

As a boy, Norbert Johnson had no trouble shaking the sleep from his eyes when he walked to Mass each weekend.

All around him, the Duvall countryside teemed with neighbors dressed in their finest, making determined strides to St. Francis de Paul Catholic Church.

Johnson, now 65, has seen footpower give way to automobiles.

But he still takes a good, hard look when his fellow parishioners cross the threshold of 104 Rocky Road — an unassuming white building near the intersec-

tion of Kewaunee's County Line Road.

Johnson will witness this scene for the last time at 9:15 a.m. Sunday, just before a closing service for St. Francis Church.

His parish is one of several that will either dissolve or merge with other parishes in the Green Bay Catholic Diocese.

The reason for St. Francis' shutdown: Too many churches in an area with too few priests.

"This is simply a logical conclusion to an inevitable process," says the Rev. Richard Mauthe, pastor of St. Francis and its sister church, St. Louis in Dyckesville.

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Parish

"Most people in our congregation realized it in their hearts a long time before this."

The larger St. Louis Church is just a few miles away from Duvall, as are St. Joseph Church, Champion; St. Hubert Church, Rosiere; St. Peter Church, Lincoln; and St. Odile Church, Thiry Daems.

Also, the St. Francis congregation is small — about 70 people, many of whom are senior citizens. "We lose four or five families every year," Johnson says. "If we're lucky, we gain one or two."

Moreover, the faithful few worship in a building that needs expensive repairs — a new roof, furnace and chimney, for starters.

The 82-year-old structure lacks running water and bathrooms. Its basement inevitably floods during spring rains.

Add to this more intangible difficulties, such as recruiting young helpers for services.

"It's been hard for us to get altar boys, so we were just about to look into having altar girls," says Don Spude, 54, president of the parish council. "We don't have to worry about that anymore."

Members voted Jan. 19 to close the church, after meetings with diocese officials and discussions with representatives from nearby parishes.

Their decision affects 12 churches in Brown, Door and Kewaunee counties, as all are part of a "cluster study" commissioned by the diocese.

Ten such clusters have been formed to study Catholic resources (money, buildings, personnel) in various locales and make recommendations for change to Bishop Robert Banks.

Banks then approves or disapproves each group's suggestions. For example, he recently agreed to the St. Francis closing, as well as the merging of two parishes in Langlade and White Lake in Langlade County.

Although each study addresses different conditions and problems, all have been spurred by a priest shortage, says Monsignor Paul Koszarek, vicar of administration for the diocese.

In "the Belgian Peninsula," as Johnson calls the St. Francis area, the number of clergy has declined from seven to four.

For this and other reasons, St. Odile in Thiry Daems also has voted to close, Koszarek says. St. Mary Church in Namur is contemplating a merger with one or two other parishes.

Mauthe believes that, in the fu-

Green Bay Catholic Diocese at glance

- 214 parishes.
- 209 priests.
- 367,000 Catholics.
- Average of 1,756 Catholics per priest.

ture, parishes stretching from St. Francis Xavier Church in Brussels to Holy Cross Church in Bay Settlement will meld into one large parish, with a common house of worship.

"It should have a new name, so everybody will be starting on the same plane," he says. "Bells from the bell towers could be combined — so when they peal, they call all people."

Yet if Mauthe's prediction comes true, he expects some steadfast opposition.

"People around here all go to Green Bay for shopping; I see half of my parish when I go to Copps or Cub Foods," he says. "But if you ask them to drive three miles for Mass, it's a hardship."

The majority of St. Francis' members have grappled with that mindset and overcome it, Johnson says. However, a few remain bitter about their church's demise.

"Anyone who says he's not going to miss it is crazy — or has no feelings," Johnson says. "But you can't get angry. It's distasteful, but the way things have to be."

To keep their minds busy in a time of sorrow, active parishioners are focusing on preparations for Sunday's Mass and a reception to follow on the church grounds.

Eventually, the building's contents will have to be dispersed: claimed by the diocese, returned to families who donated them or sold at auction, Mauthe says. Then the church itself will be sold.

St. Francis' cornerstone already has been removed, and will be integrated into a concrete marker for the parish cemetery, about a mile distant.

Parishioners still may be buried there, though the graveyard will be supervised by St. Louis Church.

If such details seem depressing to outsiders, they may provide needed comfort to those mourning the end of a beloved institution.

"When a church closes, it's like a death in the family," Mauthe says. "We go through all of the usual grieving stages — denial to acceptance."

"That's why having a final Mass is important, psychologically and spiritually. It's like putting a body into the clay — it brings a sense of closure."